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Shaffer: In Eureka, they've found a way to mark 'nuclear mishap'

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EUREKA -- In 1961, a distressed B-52 bomber burst apart in midair and crashed in a Wayne County field, killing three airmen, scattering flaming wreckage and dropping a pair of nuclear bombs onto a sleepy farm town.

One of those bombs landed in a tree, slowed by its parachute. The other, weighing several tons, struck the ground and tunneled into the earth. For weeks, the military sought the weapon's remains, digging a 40-foot hole that spanned 3 acres. They found some, but not all of the bomb, before they abandoned the search.

Five decades later, the crash that killed three airmen persists in Eureka's lore – a tobacco-field version of the Loch Ness monster. Old-timers recall it with a shudder. Veterans regard it with bowed heads and prayer. The young dismiss the story with a doubting smirk.

But now the state has placed its stamp on the crash of '61, placing a historic marker on a Main Street corner, greeting visitors to Eureka with these words: NUCLEAR MISHAP.

"We thought the world was going to end," said Virginia Hudson, 82, on hand for the marker's unveiling. "We still don't bother that place."

Eureka consists of roughly 200 souls, and if you spend a day on the bench outside BJ's Cafe, you'll meet most of them.

There's only one stoplight. A sign at the local gas station thanks you in advance for not taking the God's name in vain.

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About 100 people gathered in Eureka to see the historic marker unveiled. Adam Mattocks, the last survivor of the crash, is at left.

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But Seymour Johnson Air Force Base stands 12 miles away, so the town is accustomed to jets streaming past and to curiosity about its infamous near-catastrophe.

Adam Mattocks, the last survivor of the 1961 B-52 crash, speaks at the unveiling of the historic marker in Eureka.

"I've lived here all my life and thought it was a rumor," said Derrick Seagle, a cook at BJ's. "There's still an uproar about it. It's a small town. People don't have much to fuss about. But don't tell any of the old-timers I said that."

The plane actually crashed closer to Faro, an even-tinier farm village to the east, scorching the fields near what is known as Big Daddy's Road.

As soon as it hit, the Air Force assured locals and the press that the bombs were unarmed, couldn't possibly explode and posed no risk of radiation.

But the government did purchase an easement around the site to prevent digging, and water is still tested for contamination, which hasn't been found.

Debate about the bomb's risk persists, and in its supporting essay on the marker, the state Office of Archives and History offers this final word:

"The consensus is that the weapons were capable of exploding and delivering a nuclear blast sufficient to level homes in a five-mile radius and cause third-degree burns and set houses afire within nine miles."

To me, the whole episode seemed freakish, something from "Dr. Strangelove."

The sign looked so out-of-place next to a boarded-up supermarket. The phrase "nuclear mishap," to me, conjured up Godzilla movies and "The Twilight Zone."

But when 100 people arrived for the ceremony, most of them white-haired, many of them wearing military medals, I remembered that this marker is meant to commemorate a terrible night that might have been far worse if not for men with guts.

Among them: Earl Lancaster, the firefighter who barreled straight into the flames; Jack ReVelle, the Air Force lieutenant who led the disposal team and described the bomb as "damn close" to exploding; and Lt. Adam Mattocks, the only member of the eight-man crew who is still alive.

Standing under the marker, Mattocks recalled climbing out of the hatch of the burning B-52 – the only man aboard without an ejection seat.

He pulled his parachute cord and fell to the earth as burning debris rained around him.

"We didn't worry about the bomb," said Mattocks, 78. "We were looking at a problem that was going to explode while we were flying."

The piece of the bomb that remains at large is called the secondary, and ReVelle said it weighs 50 or 60 pounds. It can't possibly explode by itself, he said.

But locals keep a wary eye, and a cautious step, while they remember.

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